

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GOVERNOR PROPOSES THE EXPANSION AND FUNDING OF THE AGRICULTURE REVOLVING RUND; THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF SPORTS TOURISM; THE FUNDING OF AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS UNDER THE DEPARTMENT OF SPORTS, PARKS AND RECREATION AND INCREASING THE FUNDING TO PROMOTE THE US VIRGIN ISLANDS AS A VACATION DESTINATION

(August 14, 2015, St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands) Governor Kenneth E Mapp today, transmitted a bill to the 31st Legislature of the Virgin Islands to expand and fund the Agriculture Revolving Fund; to increase the Hotel Room Occupancy Tax and the Time-Share Estate (occupancy) Tax from ten (10%) per cent to twelve (12.5%) per cent effective January 1, 2016; to provide funding for the development and promotion of sports tourism; to provide funding for inter-scholastic competition of our public high schools athletes on St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, the British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico; to provide funding for recreation and sports activities by the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation and to increase the amount of funds to promote the US Virgin Islands as a vacation destination.

“There is a growing trend and movement toward locally sourced, fresh seasonal ingredients for consumers and chefs throughout the country known as the “farm-to-table movement”. Positioning the territory within this movement by expanding the growth of locally produced agricultural products in the Territory is one of the highest priorities of my administration,” Gov. Mapp said.

For decades, agriculture and its attendant benefits, have not been a priority in the Virgin Islands. Farmers struggle to work their farms and consumers, including the Government of the Virgin Islands continue to pay the highest cost for imported food and low quality fruits and vegetables. The Department of Education is spending over \$8.5 million annually on its school lunch program, which mainly consist of imported food commodities. As the department struggles to serve less processed foods, starch and sugars to our children, low inventory of locally produced fruits and vegetables make this task more difficult.

“Many travelers are seeking restaurants and food stores, which specialize or use organic, fresh and non-process food commodities. Virgin Islanders are demanding no less and many of our restaurants are seeking these commodities because having access to fresh food is rapidly becoming a restaurant’s competitive advantage,” said the Governor.

“By expanding the use of the Agriculture Revolving Fund and providing at least \$1 million each year from the increased rate of the hotel occupancy and the time-share estate tax is how my administration is seeking your support to jump start the agriculture industry in the US Virgin Islands,” Mapp said.

“This funding will support a soon to be created farmers’ cooperative to grow and provide fresh fruits, vegetables, seasonings and herbs for our school lunch program. It will provide our farmers with real support through the Department of Agriculture. These funds will be used to acquire equipment, provide land preparation, irrigation, green or organic control of pestilence, seedlings, crop management and the handling and storage of produce. Given our drought conditions, now more than ever, is the right time to make our commitment to agriculture real,” said the Gov.

As we grow and expand the number of farms, a dependable and affordable supply of produce then becomes available for our hospitals, head start programs, senior residential facilities, restaurants and ultimately the general public. The funds requested under this bill, will only be used for the growth and harvesting of food through modernization of our farm support systems.

“Our first goal is to create a farm to table school lunch program; then provide farm to table meals in our hospitals, head start centers and in our senior citizens residential communities.” Governor Mapp stated.

“It is time to grow food in the US Virgin Islands, so I respectfully ask the Legislature to join me by taking up the mantel and providing immediate action on this bill by giving it your favorable consideration,” Gov. Mapp concluded.

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